Libraries in America

By KAITLIN R. McVEY and LAURINDA KEYS LONG

The only noises are the distant ruffling of pages and the clicking of fingers on a keyboard. Diana Formway organizes a stack of multicolored children's novels as she speaks in a hushed voice, her eyes bright behind metal-rimmed glasses. "Libraries showed me what was out there in the world as well as connected me to other people and places outside my small town in upstate New York," she says. Early in life Formway realized the importance of a meeting place for the ideas and words of those who have influenced the world. That is what led her to become a librarian, and brought her to the Bellingham Public Library in western Washington state.

The first free, tax-supported public library in the United States was established in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833. Free libraries are an essential aspect of American culture, society and democracy. "Libraries are a great equalizer," says teacher Maurya Moriarty of Covina, California. "No one has to be rich to be well read. Growing up, there was very little extra cash in our house. But the library allowed us to read bestsellers, expensive children's collections, all the latest magazines, as well as newspapers from around the country."

Public libraries are funded by local governments—counties, cities or towns—and are run by appointed board members who may be paid stipends or volunteer their services. Anyone, regardless of income, social status or age, can stroll among the shelves, choose books or periodicals—now DVDs and videos—to scan through on the spot or borrow for reading at home. Every patron can receive professional help finding an answer to any question, without charge, judgment or review. Anyone living in Bellingham can apply for a library card and borrow books. A charge is applied only if the books are lost, damaged or returned past the due date.

The children's section is designed to be comfortable and inviting so the young will enjoy reading. There are low tables, chairs and fun displays and decorations. Librarians help children learn how to use reference materials and gather information for school projects. At Bellingham, there are story hours several times a week, for children aged 18 months to eight years. Teens issue a library newsletter and organize book discussions. There are puppet shows, dramas and other events to lure families and make reading exciting.

Books are organized according to the Dewey Decimal Classification System, invented by an American, Melvil Dewey in 1876. It is the world's most widely used library system and is owned by the Online Computer Library Center, a worldwide library cooperative. It assigns numbers to books in 10 main groups—such as natural science, religion, language, arts, geography and history—and then into sub groups. A book, and others related to it, can easily be found on the shelves, after checking the subject, or looking for the author or title, on a computer database. Fiction is organized separately by the author's last name.

Most libraries offer free Internet access. Natalie Cooper, a 21-year-old student at Western Washington University, uses the Bellingham library for research and the free Internet as she can't afford to subscribe. "The library allows me to have

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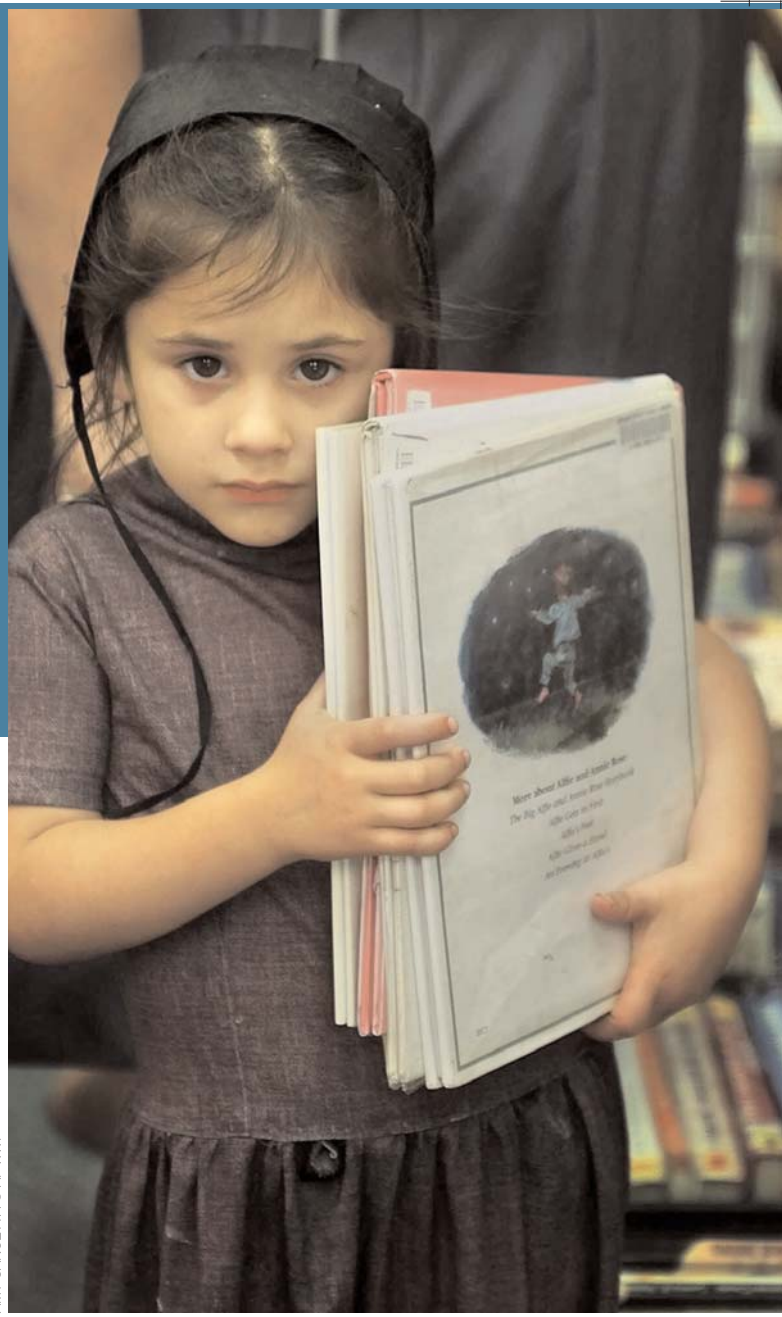
Free public libraries in most towns help build democracy by allowing Americans independent access to a world of information and ideas.



AMY SANCETTA © AP-WWP

Left: Cami Moffat scans the shelves at the Salt Lake City library in Utah.
Right: Kathy Borkholder, of the Amish community, clutches her choices from the Geauga County Public Library's bookmobile in Parkman, Ohio.

access to a world of chat rooms and interesting Web pages," she says.

Computer databases have mostly replaced the card catalogs. Librarians kept them up to date by typing three index cards for each book; author, title and subject. The cards were stored in tiers of narrow drawers, allowing users to thumb through them, connecting ideas and finding unexpected sources.

The book checkout system is also computerized now. Librarians, teachers and parents sometimes miss the old checkout cards that were slipped into paper pockets inside the back covers of the borrowed books, showing the names of those who had read them before. It provided a connection to other town residents.

Online databases and indexes have also changed how books are purchased and used. Patrons can access information through a library's Web site using their library card numbers and passwords from home. This helps those unable to get to the library and also reduces the number of printed copies the library needs to buy. Formway, the Bellingham librarian, says that the self-service Internet searches build independence in acquiring knowledge.

The unencumbered ability of citizens to enrich their minds through life-long learning is a foundation block of vibrant, transparent democracies. As noted American TV journalist Walter Cronkite said, "Whatever the costs of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation."

Libraries not only offer access to information but—aside from children's story time—many still provide a respite from the noisy, fast-paced world we live in. Dave Huynh, attending Western Washington University, remembers how the local library offered an escape from the chaotic household of his youth in Seattle. "It was nice to have somewhere to go and study, read or just allow my imagination to wander. The public library…made me feel studious as well as gave me hope that I would accomplish my dreams. My public library inspired me to continue on to higher education."

Librarians love books, but they also must administer a complex organization, interpret information, do research, maintain good public relations and manage personnel. With a bachelor's degree or its equivalent, and the ability to read one language besides English, they can enter library training schools accredited by the Board of Education of the American Library Association. ☐

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BRENDA FLANAGAN

Writing What Needs to be Read

By KAITLIN R. McVEY

HEMANT BHATNAGAR

Brenda Flanagan climbed onto the wooden stage and immediately set the tone with her laughter. "I feel like I have come home!" the energetic, black American-Caribbean writer told 120 students and professors of New Delhi's Dayal Singh College as she adjusted the microphone.

The audience listened attentively as Flanagan described the smells and sounds of India as being ever-present in her first 19 years, growing up in Trinidad with neighbors and friends of Indian descent. Though she was from a poor family within a highly class-based society, Flanagan never let her situation keep her from achieving her dreams. She tries to get across one thing to young Americans: "Regardless of what's happening around them, they have to believe in the possibility of the achievement of their dreams." Not being able to complete high school because of a lack of money did not discourage Flanagan as she clung to the inspiring lines she had uncovered as a child in an old *Harper's* magazine:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

"I was convinced in my heart that if I could get to America I would be able to do what I wanted to do," she recalled. She did not know then that the stanza was from a poem by Robert Frost.

Flanagan visited India as a U.S. State Department cultural ambassador in September 2005, and spoke on "Colorizing the Canon" to students and professors in Calcutta and New Delhi. Her travels have given her an opportunity to exchange stories and ideas on African-American literature, its impact, multiculturalism and diversity in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Chad and Panama.

Flanagan arrived in the United States in 1967 at the age of 19 with $10 and no high school diploma. She came with the intention of acquiring a job to help her family back in Trinidad but she always harbored the desire to continue her academic career and one day reach as high as her home country's prime minister. She obtained a general education diploma with the assistance of student loans. A rock solid will to succeed and the help of every book she could get her hands on helped Flanagan advance from "being a maid, working in factories, from washing laundry, cleaning hotels, cleaning out hospitals…to go from that to school, to the classroom, to really living the dream." She received her B.A. in print journalism in 1977, and later earned a master's degree in educational technology journalism and her doctorate in public health education from the University of Michigan. She "believed in the power of stories, and that if you have the opportunity to explain to people what you want and the way you would like to get it done they will be there to help you." As she readily states, "I have never been turned down anywhere in America for anything that I have gone out and asked for."

Her story stands as an inspiration to people everywhere, especially in India. As the caste system strongly controls and mandates an individual's limits and opportunities, breaking out of one's social caste means swimming against a strong, deep current. "Caste is really about class, and caste and class are operating hand in hand," Flanagan says. "And although I grew up in Trinidad where race wasn't generally talked about, we knew very well, as quietly as we kept it, that caste and class played a major role."

Flanagan focuses on African-American and Caribbean literature. While visiting

professors of English literature and writers in West Bengal, she found that African-American literature resonates so strongly with Bengalis because "they see so many of the themes that African-American writers dealt with embedded in their own culture," and look "to learn from the struggles that African-American writers write about, to learn about how they can then empower themselves."

As to being influenced unknowingly at a young age by a white American male poet, she learned early on about the power of literature to "transcend race, to transcend gender, transcend culture and transcend nationalism." For this reason she takes time from writing and teaching literature and creative writing at Davidson College in North Carolina to lecture and discuss African-American literature, accomplishments and hardships with people around the world. "Caste means that at a certain level of government, and at a certain level of institution that should be open to everyone, there are people who say no, that affirmative action does not exist," she says. "No one affirms...that this person should have an equal chance."

Giving people "a sense of hope, that they can achieve something, like that girl who came from Trinidad," has been the motivation for her writing and travels. She says that too many people "want the larger system to change," while in "daily operations we don't do anything to help each other." She stresses how important it is to individually help others and that to make a change within our societies we have to begin by helping those around us and helping ourselves. While having the dream to overcome caste or class is the first step, she says: "A dream with an operative plan on how you're going to do it and what you are going to face to get over it is very important."

Asked what she was going to take with her from India, Flanagan said, "I want to tell people how much American literature is appreciated in India, and how embracing Indian professors are." She spoke sadly of how lonely a life of teaching literature can be when the work of great African-American, Native American and Hispanic writers are still significantly under-appreciated within America. Being an author of more than 17 short stories, poems, a play, a novel—*You Alone Are Dancing* (University of Michigan Press)—and a collection of short stories, *In Praise of Island Women and Other Crimes* (KaRu Press), Flanagan knows firsthand how reaffirming diverse appreciation is. "If people would know and understand that what we are doing is making a difference, what we are producing makes a difference to people throughout the world, I think we would be much more embracing of the idea that we can't give up, that we need to say the type of things that need to be said, and we need to write the types of things that need to be read." □

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I was asked to make a presentation. I went to the reference desk of the library at the UMCP and asked the librarian for help. She listened to me carefully, and said 'I will see what I can do.' Next morning, before entering my room, I checked the pigeonhole to pick up any communication for me. I was amazed to find an envelope containing reprints and some references that were exactly what I was looking for. After my presentation I went to thank her personally.

ERIC RISBERG © AP/WWP

Americans Love SELF-HELP BOOKS

By STEVE HOLGATE

Some titles say it all: *Overcoming Anger, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution.*

Others are less direct, but manage to convey a sense of their contents: *Chicken Soup for the Soul, Awaken the Giant Within, Don't Sweat the Small Stuff.*

And maybe a few over

promise, such as *Life Without Limits: Conquer Your Fears, Achieve Your Dreams, and Make Yourself Happy.*

As you might have guessed, these are titles of some of the most popular self-help books in the United States. Many can be found in translation. For all their differences, these titles have a lot in common: they present themselves in optimistic terms; they speak directly to the reader in clear language; and they imply an ability to help the reader live a fuller life.

Each year, Americans purchase millions of books to make them slimmer, calmer, smarter, richer and more attractive. The most prominent self-help authors can gain a celebrity status rivaled only by the biggest movie stars and athletes. Phillip C. McGraw, author of several self-help books, including the bestseller, *Self Matters*, has an immensely popular television talk show. The author of *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands,* Laura Schlessinger, has played her popularity into similar multimedia success. Anthony Robbins, author of several popular self-help books, including *Awaken the Giant Within* and *Unlimited Power*, has gained a huge international following.

Books on self-improvement have been part of American culture since the founding of the country. If the *New York Times* self-help bestseller list had existed at the dawn of America's independence, Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* would have been at the top. Its balance of practical help and pithy advice—such as "a penny saved is a penny earned," and "early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise"—characterizes many self-help books even today.

Of course, the idea that readers could find in books the means for self-improvement goes back much further than the founding of the American republic. The doors of the great library in ancient Thebes bore the words "The Healing Place of the Soul."

Nor does the popularity of self-help books restrict itself to the United States. Virtually every country that has a written language offers self-help books by local authors or translations from abroad. *The Beijing Times* reports that Chinese bookstores have been swamped with books on self-awareness and dealing with loss and misfortune, especially since the SARS epidemic. Fatima Mernisi's groundbreaking books on women's issues have found broad popularity beyond her native Morocco. Even Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has weighed in with *How to Deal With Problems: The Tony Blair Way.*

Yet, there is also a particularly American flavor to self-help literature that comes from its own national character, a certain "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" appeal that speaks to Americans' sense of rugged individualism.

Today's wave of bestsellers might have begun with the publication of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in the late 1940s. Others say that the boom really took off during the late 1960s and early 1970s with such books as *Games People Play* and *I'm O.K.-You're O.K.*, which came out at a time of great social and political ferment, when Americans questioned their institutions and valued personal exploration.

Although self-help books have, in the years since, offered an easy target to skeptics and satirists, their optimistic and down-to-earth tone and their emphasis on personal empowerment have had immense appeal, in part because they offer advice, inspiration and motivation in such a wide variety of the challenges that face people, not simply in the United States, but around the world. Some tell us how to battle depression or loneliness or our bulging waistlines. Others advise parents on how to have stronger families, teachers on how to have more productive classrooms, girls on how to face the special challenges of young womanhood, boys on how to face down the class bully. Many books give pointers on how to handle our finances or make our marriages stronger. Few are openly religious, but most have a strong spiritual element.

An article in *Psychology Today* has pointed out that there are now more self-help books in print in the United States than cookbooks. While cautioning that some of these books oversimplify complex problems and make unrealistic promises on how easily readers will find solutions to serious challenges, *Psychology Today* acknowledges that many of these books can help people gain the skills and motivation to produce positive change. ☐

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